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SUBJECT: LITHUANIAN CITIES REJECT EC'S TOLERANCE TRUCK

REF: VILNIUS 579

¶1. Summary. The mayors of Lithuania's two largest cities, Vilnius and Kaunas, denied permission for the European Commission's "For Diversity, Against Discrimination" truck to set up its event in public squares. Instead, the pro-diversity campaign was relegated to a supermarket parking lot in Vilnius on August 20 and a small event at a university library in Kaunas on August 22. The campaign attracted limited media coverage and was largely unsuccessful because of its inability to use a central location. At the event in Vilnius, a "skinhead" threw a firecracker at the stage. Police arrested him. End summary.

¶2. Vilnius Mayor Juozas Imbrasas refused a permit for the "tolerance truck" to use municipal land for the second year in a row, citing the cities inability to ensure security. (Note: In July, Ibrasas had said that as long as he is mayor there will be no "advertising for sexual minorities.") In Kaunas, Lithuania's second largest city, Mayor Andrius Kupcinskas also refused a permit for the truck. He publicly explained the decision by saying that a "homosexual festival may cause many negative emotions" and that Kaunas is a traditional city.

¶3. The EC found a private partner in Vilnius, the Swedish/Dutch-owned supermarket chain Rimi, which allowed them to use a parking lot for the event. The event included a press conference, traditional Roma dances, a poetry performance by a disabled man, and an open discussion period. In Kaunas, the EC worked with Vytautas Magnus University to host a "living libraries" event with members of minorities and groups that face discrimination telling personal stories and answering questions. One of the EC organizers, Jurgis Vilcinskas, Press Officer for the EC's office in Vilnius, told us that he was pleased with the event because it attracted media attention to this serious issue.

Media and NGO Reactions

¶4. The Vilnius event generated, at best, superficial and, at worst, patronizing media coverage. Some of the coverage was thinly veiled criticism that emphasized, for example, that the Roma at the event were too shy to speak to the media and that the disabled people at the event were happy to live in Lithuania. The implicit message from the media was that discrimination is not a problem in Lithuania.

¶5. Margarita Jankauskaite, of the Center for Equal Advancement (an NGO), told us that the whole event was a "fiasco." The mayors' statements were appalling, she said, and without help and better understanding from policy makers information campaigns will continue to be ineffective. She said it was "a really sad situation" that the EC and NGOs had to rely on private business because they received no public support. She also lamented the media's lack of serious discussion about the issue of discrimination.

¶6. The Lithuanian Gay League did not participate in the Vilnius event as a sign of protest, to show that they would

not compromise and thereby appear to accept the city's decision. Jankauskaite, the NGO representative, was genuinely concerned, however, that the minor incident of the skinhead throwing a firecracker on stage would likely have become a major incident if there had been a homosexual presence at the event. Jankauskaite believes that the skinheads are organized, that they were watching the event, and they would have converged and reacted violently if the event had focused on homosexuality.

¶7. To illustrate the political context, it is worth noting that also on August 20 four minor nationalist political parties merged to form the Lithuanian National Center. The new group stated that its main goals are to make instigation of ethnic hatred an administrative rather than a criminal offense, to nullify Lithuania's ratification of the Lisbon treaty, to keep the national currency (the Litas) and never accept the Euro, to maintain mandatory service in the military, and to encourage Lithuanians to have "pure national" families. (Comment: Even after the merger the new group is still quite small, although its existence illustrates there is still a market for this type of sentiment in Lithuania.)

LEADER